AHK 3rd ed Discussion questions

Ch. 1

What appear to be the most important elements of Goguryeo’s history to understanding ancient Korean history as a whole? How can one explain the claim that Goguryeo best represents ancient Korea?

What were the most important factors that allowed the leaders and people of Goguryeo to escape conquest by China? How does the Great Battle of Salsu River of 612 represent this narrative?

How does the chapter explain the significance of the origins myths in understanding both primal religion and ancient history in Korea? Would you agree with this assessment?

Ch. 2

In your view, were the Three Kingdoms actually all “Korean”? In what ways could they have been considered part of a single nation, for example? And how does Silla’s history call into question the notion of a “Three Kingdoms” period?

Was the manner by which Silla unified the Three Kingdoms a “betrayal” of the Korean nation? Why or why not?

What features of the account of Queen Seondeok’s life seem most interesting? Why? What is her symbolic value in understanding the unification’s historical significance?

How does the early relationship with China and Japan, and its subsequent historical impact to the present day, become highlighted in the chapter’s narrative of the Silla “unification”?

Ch. 3

Which features of Buddhism would you emphasize as the most important in understanding the Three Kingdoms era, the Silla unification process, and Unified Silla kingdom era?

What about Jang Bogo—based on the scattered sources that are available--makes him a good representation of the Unified Silla kingdom, and as a symbol for Koreans in modern times? How did he represent themes of economic and commercial history that would be helpful in understanding this era?

How did the “Bone Rank” social hierarchy system of Silla reflect Silla’s special characteristics, both before and after “unification”? How did Queen Seondeok, Jang Bogo, and Choe Choe Chiwon embody this social hierarchy?

Ch. 4

Many Korean historians, including those in North Korea, believe that founding of Goryeo, not its predecessor Silla, signaled the first genuine “unified” Korean state. Others believe it wasn’t very unified at all. How can one argue for either side?

How would you describe the relationship between the center and regions that directed the events surrounding the Goryeo founding?

How “authentic” do the contents of the Ten Injunctions appear?  In other words, could they indeed have been the last commands of Wang Geon, or do they seem to have originated under other circumstances?

Ch. 5

How did major historical themes, such as foreign relations, social hierarchy, and national identity, contribute to the start and outcome of the Myocheong Rebellion?

What is the chapter’s overall portrayal of the historical significance of Buddhism, as well as of religion and its relationship to politics, in the Goryeo era?

Should Myocheong be considered a mostly positive historical figure, or a mostly negative one, and why? What does the chapter suggest about the impact of the compilation of the “History of the Three Kingdoms” to both this event and its historical evaluation?

How would you summarize the questions surrounding the character of Korean civilization that have been raised by the modern perspectives on the Myocheong Rebellion?

Ch. 6

What connections can be drawn between the era of military rule and the succeeding era of Mongol domination?

Could one argue that the Mongol overlord period, on the whole, had a positive impact on Korea?  Explain.  

How does the chapter frame the broader implications of Mongol interaction on Korean history, identity, and customs?

Should Lady Gi (or “Empress Gi”) be considered a controversial historical figure?  Why or why not?

Ch. 7

In your view, was the Goryeo-Joseon transition a renaissance, a revolution, or more of a coup? Or was it something else?

In what ways could you argue that Jeong Dojeon, the scholar-official, had a greater historical impact than any of the monarchical/royalty figures I the founding of the Joseon dynasty? Which of the major historical figures of this era is most interesting, and why?

Could it be argued that King Sejong the Great’s historical standing is exaggerated? How does the mythology surrounding the Korean alphabet affect this judgement?

Ch. 8

How would you explain the appeal of Confucian family teachings to political and social leaders in the early Joseon era? What about Confucianism’s long history in Korea contributes to this understanding?

Should Lady Sin Saimdang be properly considered a major historical figure?  Why or why not?  Should she be considered a model female, to be celebrated?

Ch. 9

What would be the best historical theme for understanding Korea’s experience in this half-century period of invasions: social hierarchy, national identity, external relations, or politics?

Considering the competing “narratives of heroism”, who or what was most responsible, in your view, for withstanding or repelling the Japanese invasions: Admiral Yi, the “Righteous Armies”, the Ming Chinese, or someone (or something) else?

How did the Koreans’ experience of the Japanese war affect their response to the Manchu threat a few decades later? How did factionalism, for example, affect the political circumstances that surrounded both events?

Ch. 10

In considering the preceding two centuries of the Joseon dynasty, where or when can one locate the origins of the intense factionalism of the 17th century?

Who should be more admired, Lady Jang or Queen Inhyeon?  Who or what was most responsible for the tragic turns of the “love triangle” between these two women and King Sukjong?

How does the theme of women and family, together with religion and social hierarchy, play a role in understanding the Lady Jang episode’s broader implications?

Ch. 11

Between the Jeong Yagyong (Dasan), King Jeongjo, and the Northern Learning figures, who was historically most important, and why?

Is it accurate to view this era as a "golden age" in the Joseon dynasty? Do you agree with the chapter's explanation about why this period is so appealing or interesting to contemporary Koreans, especially concerning the notion of modernity?

What is the significance of the northern learning school and of this era in understanding the economic history of the late Joseon dynasty? How would you evaluate these thinkers' diagnosis of Korean society and polity of the time?

How would you explain the rise of the Northern Learning School? In other words, what short-term and long-term historical developments contributed to the emergence of such perspective and people?

Ch. 12

Considering the descriptions and examples of popular culture, such as the “Tale of Chunhyang,” how did “society” in the late Joseon era fit into the general pattern of social hierarchy throughout Korean history, and how did it differ?

In examining closely the famous genre paintings of Kim Hongdo and Sin Yunbok, how do these paintings compare to the portrayal of late Joseon society in the “Tale of Chunhyang”, particularly concerning the social standing of courtesans, or *gisaeng*?

Why, do you believe, were the creators and managers of popular culture in the late Joseon era overwhelmingly of non-aristocratic, but also not commoners, but rather those from secondary (elite) status?

Ch. 13

What feature of the 19th century represented the strongest example of the Joseon dynasty’s long history, and which the biggest break from previous Joseon history?

How would you describe the balance or relationship between external and internal factors that determined the main character of the 19th century in Korea? Which specific factors had the most impact?

What about Catholicism and Donghak, do you believe, might have been the most appealing to Koreans, and what features presented the biggest threat to those who held power? Specify what category (or class) of people you are speaking about.

What explains the enormous influence of religion on the tumult of the 19th century?

Ch. 14

In what ways was 1894 a "fateful year"?

Which of the three main events that took place in 1894 was the most historically significant, and why? How could they have served as historical watershed moments?

How did the Tonghak uprising represent a logical outcome of the Donghak religion’s teachings since the time of the founder, Choe Jeu? What was the historical significance, in terms of long-term influence, of the Donghak Uprising?

Which of the initial Gabo Reform edicts are the most interesting or revolutionary, and why?

Ch. 15

What were the most significant events or developments, such as those in the economy or culture, in the Great Korean Empire period, and why?

How could one characterize the main goals and impact of mass print media in the Korean Empire period, such as “The Independent” newspaper?

What should be historical judgement of the Korean Empire, given everything that happened before, during, and after its brief existence? Do you agree that such an assessment should be centered on the country's autonomy in this era?

Ch. 16

What was, on the whole, imperialism’s greatest impact on Korean history in the period of the Japanese takeover (1904-1918)? Do you agree that Japanese imperialism was the most important factor in Korea’s loss of autonomy?

What were the reasons behind differences in perspective and reactions to Japanese influence between Korean elites and commoners?

In the end, was Korean resistance or collaboration regarding the Japanese takeover of greater historical import? Why?

Ch. 17

In the end, was the March First Movement of 1919 a success or failure?  In what ways did it succeed, and in what ways did it fail? Consider these questions also for the Korean Provisional Government.

Should Na Hyeseok be considered a representative figure of her times, or an exceptional figure?  Consider her life and writings, and the developments in the themes of women and family, religion, and external influence in the "long 1920s".

How should one evaluate the historical importance and impact of the policy of "Cultural Rule" in the 1920s to early 1930s? Consider the changes in national identity, culture, and social mobility, among other realms.

Ch. 18

What does the chapter argue in regards to the impact of mass culture, especially newspapers, on Koreans' sense of identity in the 1930s? What about the relationship between the everyday and modern change in this period? How does the Son Gijeong photo incident fit into these claims?

What do you believe was the most important structural factor in the emergence of a sense of a modern Korean identity during the late colonial period: newspapers and other publications, the growth of both popular and high culture, the colonial government, economic changes, or something else?

How would you characterize the broader impact of "politics" in this era, especially considering the relationships between political actors and interests?

Ch. 19

What, do you believe, were the most distinctive features of Koreans' experience of mass mobilization for war, and what were the reasons behind them? How does Chapter 19 frame this issue?

What should be the historical judgment of “collaborators” like Yi Gwangsu, Choe Namseon, or businessmen like Kim Seongsu? Were they traitors who betrayed their nation? Or were they in fact “nationalists” looking out for the Korean people’s welfare? Or something else?

How could one best carry out a "forthright engagement with the issue of collaboration"?

What does Chapter 19 suggest about the historical significance of the colonial-period independence movements? Would you agree? Why or why not?

Ch. 20

Did external or internal factors play a greater role in how the “liberation space” (1945-50 period) turned out for Korea, especially southern Korea?

In what ways did Korea "decolonize" in this period, and in what ways did it not? How did the 1948 elections in southern Korea reflect this issue?

What were the most consequential features of the American occupation of southern Korea?

Who or what was the biggest reason for the failure of Korea to remain united following liberation, do you believe?

Ch. 21

In the end, would you say that the Korean War was more a civil war or an international war? What affects one's balance of important historical forces under consideration in answering this question?

How does one explain, from a historical standpoint, the severity of the conflicts and recriminations among Koreans in the Korean War? How, if at all, did the emerging Cold War contribute to the atrocities committed in the war?

What explains the major differences in how the Korean War is remembered in various countries, as well as within South Korea? What does his say about the original conflict itself?

Ch. 22

What influenced the Soviet occupation of northern Korea the most?

What was the so-called “Juche Speech” of 1955 about, and how can we understand these points in the context of the "politics of autonomy" in early North Korea? And what is the central problem with the “Juche Speech,” according to the chapter? Would you agree?

What are the ways that “history” played a central role in the political development of early North Korea?

What was the most important factor in determining the way early North Korea as a country emerged and developed from the 1940s to 1960s? Consider both the internal and external factors, as well as issues of politics, economy, culture (especially history), and other themes.

Ch. 23

Between the the April student uprising of 1960 and the May 16 coup of 1961, which was more "revolutionary" in its historical impact? How should the one-year period between these two events be considered in the historical trajectory of South Korea in the 1960s?

What is the best way to describe the nature and impact of “youth culture” in 1960s South Korea? How does this fit within the larger flow of modern Korean history, and how could one compare this to other historical contexts?

Who had the most significant impact in 1960s South Korea: students, workers, foreign relations, the *chaebol* conglomerate companies like Hyundai, Park Chung Hee, or someone (or something) else? Why and how?

Ch. 24

What about Jeon Taeil's suicide or the publication of Kim Jiha’s “Five Bandits” could have posed the greatest challenge to the South Korean government and/or social order of the 1970s? How does your answer reflect the character of the "Yusin" dictatorship that ruled most of that decade?

How was the New Village Movement representative of the Yusin system as a whole? What role did foreign trade, economic actors, and other economic factors contribute to this process?

Between the competing “industrialization” and “democratization” narratives for understanding South Korean history, which is more important for explaining what happened in the 1970s? Or is there a better, alternative narrative?

How would you describe the “culture of resistance” to dictatorship in the 1970s, based on the activities and relationships of literary and cultural figures, religious leaders, and workers and students?

Ch. 25

How would you describe the relationship between the development of “monumental life” in North Korea and the country’s economic calamities, including the famine of the 1990s? How did this relationship support the chapter's notion of the "tragedy" of North Korean history? Would you agree?

How did the control and manipulation of history within North Korea serve to sustain the personal rule of Kim Il Sung and his descendants? Why is history itself so central to understanding North Korea's recent past as a whole?

In what ways did the aftermath of the 1990s famine lead to major changes in North Korea in the early 21st century, and in what ways did it not? What, then, ultimately was the historical impact of the famine?

Ch. 26

Which was the most important contributor to South Korean democratization? The workers, students, religious figures, and other representatives of “the people” who resisted the dictatorships?  Economic development?  South Korea’s external relations?  Or the nature of the dictatorship itself?  Or something else?

How can one assess the larger historical significance of the Gwangju Uprising of 1980? In what ways was South Korea's democratization an "extended" process, and in what ways something dominated by the events of 1987?

Given Kim Dae Jung’s activities and influence since the 1970s, which of the two figures, Kim or Park Chung Hee, ultimately had a greater impact on modern South Korean history, and why?

Ch. 27

How did the economic crisis of 1997-99 affect South Koreans' experience of the turn of the twenty-first century?

What were the most important historical factors, both long term and short term, behind the major changes affecting South Korean women in the 1990s and 2000s?

What phenomenon was most interesting or representative of South Korea in the first decade of the new millennium: popular culture, economic developments, technology, political changes, international factors, or something else?